

Jeff's View

Five easy steps to get rid of your lab

Congratulations! You have just become a permanent professor – a *Certified Academic*[®]. Now that you have made it through the treacherous rapids of temporary appointments, you probably expect the academic *River of No Return* to wash you gently into the *Bay of Retirement*. Brace yourself for a rude shock, because you have just been handed a life sentence of forced hard labor. Setting up your first lab as an Assistant Professor was your academic honeymoon, but now it is time to face reality – those problems you overlooked at the start will grow on you and haunt you for the rest of your career. As the head of a lab, you will always have to toil for others. Year after year, every student and postdoc will bother you with umpteen problems; settling the authorship of papers will require the craftiness of a lawyer, the patience of a clinical psychiatrist, and the impassiveness of a Buddhist monk. And trying to rake in the funds for keeping your lab humming will chain you to a computer for most of the time. It will be like repainting the Golden Gate Bridge – as soon as you have worked your way to one end, it is time to start at the other one. If you look at it squarely, you are done for.

But all is not lost. You have already shown the world – and yourself – that you can run a lab, so why not ditch it and move on to bigger things? I am not talking about becoming a chairman, a dean, or a university president – they all serve their own harsh sentences. I am talking about *Easy Street* – learned societies, think tanks, obscure scientific academies and advisory bodies, where almost everyone is either President, Secretary General, or on an expense account. You, too, can do it – just about everybody can. Only that lab of yours stands in the way. You cannot simply walk away from it or return it to the sender, but you can make it go away all by itself. It only takes a little patience – and five easy steps.

Step 1: Accept as many students and postdocs as you can. Never ask the others in the lab what they think about the people who apply to you, and do not worry about whether there is enough space. Be vague when you assign individual bench spaces or, better yet, make several people use the same bench space *on a rotating basis*. And while you are at it, put several of them on the same research topic and keep consumables in short supply. Having your students and postdocs step on each others' toes and bump into each others' brain is a great way to keep adrenalin levels high and general happiness low.

Step 2: Never enter your lab. Have your people trudge to your office, which should be as far from the lab as possible and reflect your exalted position. If necessary, use creative bookkeeping to convert grant money into a plush carpet, designer curtains, an impressive executive desk for yourself, and uncomfortable chairs for your visitors. Everything about your office should convey the message *I am the boss*. Do not waste time discussing unsuccessful experiments – you want *Publishable Results*. Insist on office hours (do not be too generous there) and keep looking at your watch to remind your students and postdocs that you have more important things to do than to talk to them. Always keep the door to your office shut, and put visitors in their place with blinking WAIT and ENTER signs. Above all, hire a fiercely loyal secretary who guards the en-

trance to your inner sanctum with the charm of an underfed pit bull. The office of a *Very Important Person* is usually empty, so do not stick around too much. Never turn down an invitation to join a committee, write a review or a book, chair a panel, consult for a company, or attend a meeting – especially a foreign one. A scientist of your stature should not sit in an office, but be either abroad, jet-lagged, or dashing for the airport.

Step 3: Pick a favorite among your group (let us call him Jim) and let everyone know. Remarks such as *Why can't you be like Jim?* or *Funny, Jim had no problems at all with this experiment!* are a great way to dent egos, make Jim a pariah, and divide your lab into warring factions. To keep them warring, complain to Jim about others in the lab. If you ask Jim to keep your complaints to himself, he will leak them verbatim to the rest of the lab as soon as you are out of sight. If you want to go all out and can rise to the challenge, use the next Christmas party to start an affair with a member of your group. That is bound to be a bombshell and will guarantee that your lab will talk about nothing else.

Step 4: Never miss a chance to put your students and postdocs in their place. Refer to them as *data grinders* or *bodies*, preferably when they are around to hear it. Interrupt them when they give seminars or progress reports until you have reduced them to stuttering wrecks. Keep them well separated from all seminar visitors – these are, after all, *your* guests, not theirs. When they ask you to write a letter for them or look at the draft of a manuscript, let them cool their heels for a few weeks before you respond – that will remind them that you are *real busy*. And when you talk about your group's work at international meetings, never mention your coworkers by name and let the audience know that *you had burned up a string of postdocs on this problem until you yourself stepped in and solved it*.

Step 5: Do not be squeamish about wielding power. Trying to get rid of your students and postdocs will not make you their darling, so do not worry about what they say about you when you are not around – which should be most of the time. During the rare moments when you see them face to face and suffer their flak, remind yourself that you will outgun them later many times over. Every single one of them will need letters of recommendation from you, and that will be your *jour de gloire*. You could refuse to write these letters, but would then blow the chances to get even and to show off your mastery of academic *double entendre*, which conveys the opposite of what is written. The epithets *good*, *conscientious*, or *diligent* are poisonous arrows that will do their jobs and prevent the subjects of your letter from getting theirs. So will the remark that *XY might well mature further*. But if you really want to do somebody in, then use the term *solid*. It means *dumb* in plain English and will stop anybody from reading any further. In the arcane code of academic recommendation letters, *solid* is the ultimate stop codon. Recommendation letters are supposed to be confidential, but you can be sure that those for whom you wrote them will soon know every dot and comma of them and vent their feelings about you with gusto for the rest of their life.

Those five steps should do it. As you can see, curing you of your lab is not nearly as hard as it seems. And as long as the

academic grapevine stays as lively as it is, the cure will be permanent. What more can you ask for? On the strength of your *Past Research Experience*, you will be free to roam new pastures where the grass is greener, everybody's hair grayer, and the offices even more impressive. But it might still be a good idea to keep that secretary.

I thank Markus Affolter, Heimo Brunetti and Mike Yaffe for helpful comments.



Gottfried Schatz
Biozentrum, University of Basel, Switzerland
E-mail address: gottfried.schatz@unibas.ch

[Available](#) online 24 November 2004